Absolutely fabulous

'Hedwig and the Angry Inch' offers fresh approach to rock opera

ON SCREEN
by Warren Epstein

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Hedwig, the world-weary diva, pulls on her blond wig, straps on her electric guitar, and, from a stage beside the salad bar of the Bilgewater seafood restaurant, rampages through a post-punk, neo-glam-rock ballad that draws us into her strange and wonderful odyssey.

"Hedwig and the Angry Inch" is a bold new take on the rock opera. Half of the story is told through the lyrics of Hedwig's songs, and much of the emotional lilt rises from the music.

But it's not a pure opera like "Tommy" or "Evita." Nobody bursts into song in lieu of dialogue. Rather, songs are like the first stage of rockets that ultimately take us soaring through flashback after flashback of Hedwig's life.

Hedwig, we learn, used to be Hansel, a boy in East Berlin who discovers American rock 'n' roll through Armed Forces Radio and dances wildly on his bed like the kid in "Billy Elliot."

As he grows up, rock music continues to be Hansel's passion, but what really gives his life purpose is a never-ending search for his "other half." This quest is explained through a clever childlike illustration of Plato's story about the days when the gods, fearful of humans' power, split them in two, leaving them to long for the missing being who would make them whole.

Hansel believes he's found his other half in Luther, an American GI who offers to marry him and take him to America — if Hansel will have a sex-change operation and become Hedwig, his wife.

He reluctantly agrees, but the surgery is botched. Luther ends up leaving Hedwig for another, and the lonely transsexual winds up doing baby-sitting and other odd jobs ("You do the math") to make ends meet.

During one of these jobs, Hedwig meets and falls for Tommy, a cute and naive Dungeons-and-Dragons Jesus freak. Hedwig takes on Tommy as a kind of project, determined to fashion him into a rock star.

Those efforts succeed, but their love eventually meets a significant obstacle: Hedwig's butchered anatomy.

Former Colorado Springs resident John Cameron Mitchell wrote, directed and stars in the film, which is scored by Stephen Trask. It's based on a cabaret show that Mitchell and Trask created in New York City in the mid-'90s.

Thankfully, it lacks the claustrophobic feel of so many play-to-film adaptations. Mitchell has expanded the show to epic proportions by letting fantasy break in at will. At one point, the wall to Hedwig's trailer falls (a metaphor for the fall of the Berlin Wall) and transforms into the stage for an outdoor concert.

But it's not the metaphors or the stylistic flourishes that make "Hedwig" a truly great film. It's Mitchell's bravado performance as Hedwig. He introduces us to a dynamic new hero/heroine, an androgynous creature who can rock with the ferocity of a young David Bowie one moment and draw sympathy with quiet tears the next.

I know that many people will be uncomfortable with the homosexuality and transsexuality Hedwig represents. But if they go on this journey with her, maybe they'll come to see her not as a sexuality but as a wounded soul, a person who's on the same quest for love that we're all on.

Rafy

John Cameron Mitchell, a former Colorado Springs resident, wrote, directed and stars in "Hedwig and the Angry Inch." The movie is based on a cabaret show created by Mitchell and Stephen Trask, and it easily makes the transition from stage to film.

'Hedwig and the Angry Inch'

RATING
A+

STARRING: John Cameron Mitchell, Michael Pitt, Miriam Shor, Stephen Trask

DIRECTOR: John Cameron Mitchell

PLAYING AT: Kimball's

RATED: R (sexual content and strong language)

RUNNING TIME: 95 minutes

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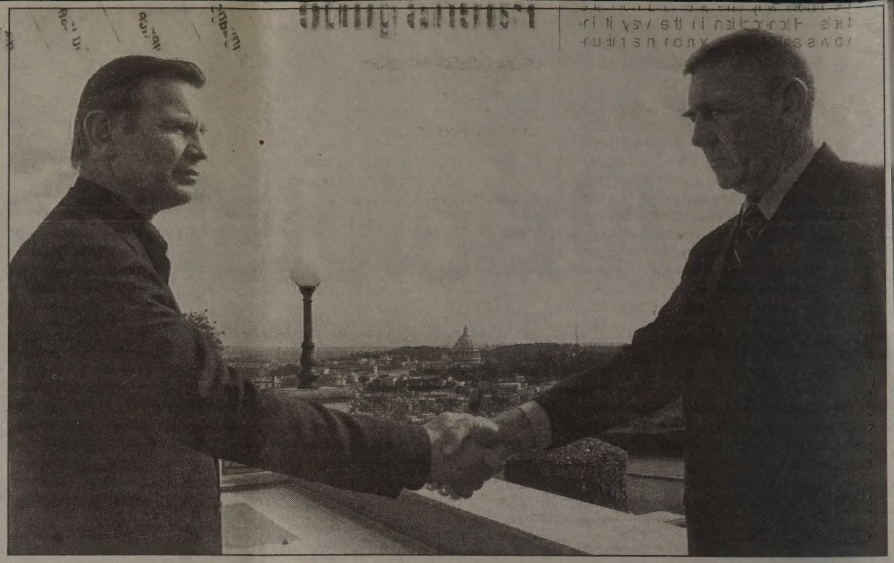
CONTINUING

"American Outlaws" D (PG-13) — Astonishingly bad pop retooling of the legend of Jesse James, with Colin Farrell seeming less like the leader of the James-Younger Gang than like the lead singer in a boy band. There was a great American film about the famous gang, Philip Kaufman's "The Great Northfield, Minnesota, Raid" (1972), and this movie crouches in its shadow like the Nickelodeon version. With Scott Caan, Ali Larter, Harris Yulin, Timothy Dalton. 94 minutes. (RE) (Gold Hill)

"American Pie 2" B (R) — Who'd have thought the sequel to 1999's stale droolfest would turn out to be such a fresh summer comedy? It's a crude movie, to be sure, but not gratuitously so. "Pie 2" smartly builds on the funniest concept in the first film — band camp — and it prominently features the geeky flutist (Alyson Hannigan) who turned Jim (Jason Biggs) into her love slave. It also comes up with an embarrassing physical bit for star Biggs that's funnier than the confection copulating he did in the original. Strong sexual content, crude humor, strong language and drinking. 100 minutes. (WE) (Carmike, Chapel Hills, Cinemark, Tinseltown, Gold Hill)

"America's Sweethearts" C+ (PG-13) — At the heart of this romantic comedy isn't a cute love story, but a Hollywood pitchman. You can almost hear his pitiful patter: "OK, you don't like the love story, how about I throw in a Doberman who licks Billy Crystal's crotch?" Woven through this desperate carnival of schtick is a loose plot about an estranged Hollywood couple (Catherine Zeta-Jones and John Cusack) who are pressured to get back together to promote their new film. But as bad as the movie is, it does surprise us with several funny and charming moments. Strong language and mild sexual content. 110 minutes. (WE) (Tinseltown)

"Animal" Not reviewed. (PG-13) — Rob Schneider plays a guy who receives transplants from animals. The film was not screened for critics. (Tinseltown)



"Megiddo — Omega Code 2" is the Cain-and-Abel story of two men enamored with the same woman, raised as brothers, who grow up to find themselves pitted against each other.

"Bridget Jones's Diary" B- (R) — Adapted from the popular novel, which was, in turn, adapted from Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," this quirky British love-triangle farce delivers several funny sendups of singlehood but lacks the charm of "Notting Hill" or "Four Weddings and a Funeral." A chunky Renee Zellweger (she gained more than 20 pounds for the role) is so believable in the title role, a frustrated, neurotic English "singleton," she'll make you wonder if the whole raised-in-Texas thing was a ruse. Hugh Grant also is terrific, departing from his shy, stammering persona to play a smarmy playboy. Language and strong sexuality. 95 minutes. (WE) (Super Saver)

"Captain Corelli's Mandolin" C (R) — Nicolas Cage plays an Italian officer who leads a small army force in the occupation of a picturesque Greek island, where the doctor's daughter (Penelope Cruz) blindsides him with love. She is engaged to a Greek partisan (Christian Bale), but likes this dreamy Italian; meanwhile the Germans turn up and make things dicey for everyone after Mussolini surrenders. The movie lacks the passion and humor of Louis de Bernieres' famous novel. 127 minutes. (RE) (Chapel Hills, Cinemark, Tinseltown)

"Cats and Dogs" B- (PG) — It's hard to watch dogs donning headsets and cats wearing night-vision goggles without developing a bad case of the giggles. This cute but disposable live-action film is about the secret high-tech war between cats and dogs going on right in our back yards. Tobey Maguire ("Wonder Boys") lends his voice to an innocent beagle puppy named Lou, who becomes the key canine operative in an attempt to thwart the great feline threat. Fantasy violence. 87 minutes. (WE) (Super Saver)

"Cirque du Soleil: Journey of Man" A- (Not rated) — This IMAX film mesmerized audiences when it played last year at the Denver Museum of Natural History, and now it's come to Colorado Springs — in 3-D. The spellbinding film serves as a kind of "best of Cirque du Soleil" video, highlighting the most dramatic portions from the acrobats' various touring shows and placing them in beautiful and evocative locales. Appropriate for all audiences. 40 minutes. (WE) (Cinemark)

"The Deep End" A- (R) — Tilda Swinton plays a mother of three who lives on the shore of Lake Tahoe. Her husband is away. She's worried about her 17-year-old son (Jonathan Tucker), who has fallen into a dangerous relationship with a sleazy 30-year-old gay gambler (Josh Lucas). A death takes place, she misunderstands how it happened, and tries to cover it up. Then a blackmailer (Goran Visnjic) arrives. The plot piles one surprise on top of another, but it's anchored by the calm competence of Swinton's performance;

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